

Book Discussion Questions for *The Cutters* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her."¹ As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines and some of her serials became books. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3rd, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.



Mrs. Aldrich preferred to write out her manuscripts. To get her manuscripts ready for publishing, she hired local girls to type her stories. This is an example of the kind of typewriter that would have fit inside her desk and is on display in the front room at the Bess Streeter Aldrich House in Elmwood.

About *The Cutters*

Like *Mother Mason*, this Aldrich title started out as a magazine serial. While *Mother Mason* focused on a family with young adult children, the *Cutters* have younger children ages twelve, seven, nine and a baby. Biographer Carol Miles Petersen notes there was another significant difference between the two books. "While these *Cutter* stories remained basically as they first appeared, Aldrich rewrote the beginnings of most of them to provide transitions. The rewriting provided great continuity, as in a novel, rather than individual stories loosely joined as the *Masons* had been."² The *Cutter* family reflected the Aldriches as the oldest is a girl followed by three boys. According to the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook*, "Josephine, the teenage daughter, was patterned after Mary Eleanor Aldrich."³ *The Cutters* celebrates family and small town with optimistic sentimentality. For more information on this book, please contact aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

¹ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

² Quoted from *Bess Streeter Aldrich* by Carol Miles Peterson (page 71)

³ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 19)

The Cutters Story Location: the Meadows, a Midwestern town; **Cutters Family Character Descriptions**

Ed	Father, attorney, generous with his time and resources; loving to his family
Nell	Mother; busy, often wants what she doesn't have, hard-working, takes care of her family
Josephine	Age 12; "too old to be cunning and too young to be cute" "intricate labyrinth of emotions"5
Craig	Age 9; dreamer, acted only on his own ideas (5); accurate with details; with Nicholas often
Nicholas	Age 7; "quick, impulsive, a live wire" (5)
Leonard	Baby; very minor character until the last chapter
Gramma	Ed's Mother; raised 8 kids; twice a pioneer; farmer's wife; looks to the past for wisdom
Opal Peterson	"So often in a small town your maid is no servant at all, but a real neighborly human being." (Ch. 1)

All of the chapters were short stories at one time, so they can be read chapter by chapter.

"Guests"	1) What did the family do to present the best version of their household to the guests? 2) Does your opinion of the guests change during the chapter? What about the family? 3) Should the Cutters have persuaded Josephine to experience time at the Keplars?
"Reversion to Type"	1) Did Nell have unrealistic expectations of her children? Is it okay to expect a certain standard? 2) Whose parenting advice is more realistic – Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills or Gramma's? 3) Does this chapter help you recall any of your own parenting moments?
"The White Elephant Sale"	1) Nell appreciated Mrs. Ramsey's simplicity. How does the rest of the family feel? 2) What type of drastic methods does Mrs. Ramsey insist that Nell follow? 3) What type of person is Mrs. Ramsey 4) Have you ever regretted donating anything?
"The Family Takes a Vacation"	1) Has your family ever taken separate trips where everyone goes a different direction? 2) Does Nell's visit with Sylvia sound like something that you would enjoy? 3) Do you have an active imagination regarding family safety like Nell? 4) Which family member do you think struggled most during their time apart? Who enjoyed the time the most?
"Josephine Encounters a Siren"	1) Do you think the definition of "siren" has changed over the last 100 years? 2) Have you ever chosen one friend over another? Do you regret that choice? 3) Have you ever suffered betrayal by a friend? How did you recover?
"The Nicest House in Town"	1) Are you living in your dream house? Is it possible to have everything you want in a house? 2) How have home decorating networks impacted the housing market? 3) Why do you think Nell's family was able to be content while she struggled?
"The Homecoming"	1) After eagerly anticipating her children visiting, why was Gramma so disappointed? 2) Did her sons have the correct perspective of their childhood? How was it different than Gramma's views? 3) Did Gramma's recollections help or hurt the conversations? Why?
"Meadows Entertains a Celebrity"	1) Why was picking a location for the gathering so problematic? Are these concerns common everywhere or only in small towns? 2) Have you ever gone overboard with too much effort? 3) What truths shared at the end were important reminders?
"Easy Money"	1) Have you ever tried a side business? 2) Have you ever been stuck with items (like the furniture polish) because of a contest? 3) Do you think the company gave out the prize?
"The Present Generation"	1) Barbara enters the book rather blustery. Do you like her character? 2) Did she help to expand the Cutters' thinking? 3) Did you predict what was really happening?
"The Children Grow Up"	1) Do you agree with this last page quote, "I'd tell mothers ... that their very happiest time is when the children are all little and making them the most work?" 2) Can parents live balanced during the busyness? 3) Was this chapter a satisfying end to the book?

Facilitator Guide to *The Cutters* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

More insight into *The Cutters* from Bess Streeter Aldrich herself:

“Bess treasured a fan letter from Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. who had sent Mrs. Aldrich a copy of *The Cutters* which she wished to have autographed. The letter continued: *I gave the book to my mother-in-law who loved it. Later she sent a copy to Rudyard Kipling ... He wrote that while he had found the book interesting and charming he could not believe that there were any people as nice as that in the whole world.*”⁴³

More about *The Cutters* chapters, including original story title names and character mentions

“Guests”	Originally titled as “The Woman Nell Cutter Was Afraid Of” <i>American Magazine</i> January 1922 Which title do you think better describes the theme of this chapter? What word(s) could have been added to better describe the guests? Major characters: all of the family members. Extra characters - The Guests: BJ Keplar (“typical big, prosperous-looking business man” arrived in town to do business) Mrs. Keplar (“perfection,” “gracious,” intimidating)
“Reversion to Type”	“Mother Gets Back on the Job” If so, <i>American Magazine</i> February 1922 Additional Questions: Which title fits the theme of this chapter better? How have parenting methods change through the years? Has any particular style has been emphasized more than others? Did Gramma’s speech make you glad or mad? Featured characters: Nell, Ed, the boys as a group; Gramma Guest characters: Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills (“She raised her aristocratic-looking eyebrows questioningly and smiled. If her smile was rather too saccharine in quality, simple-hearted Gramma was unmindful of it.”)
“The White Elephant Sale”	First published as “Nell Cutter’s White Elephants” in <i>American Magazine</i> , April 1922 Additional question: Is the word “sale” in the title helpful to explaining what happens or do you like the fact that the meaning is unclear in the magazine article title? Featured characters: Guest characters: Mrs. Archibald Ramsey (Mrs. Ramsey had no children; and she had reduced housework to an almost negligible quantity. Therefore she had ample time and strength left for reforming other women’s methods.) Other minor characters include women from the club
“The Family Takes a Vacation”	Possibly first published as “Nell Cutter Lets Her Family Shift for Itself” in <i>American Magazine</i> , October 1922). Which title do you think fits the chapter best? Most of the chapter focuses on Nell who goes to visit Sylvia McManus; Family plans: Ed goes fishing with Doc Rhodes and old Dad Miller; Josephine (Mellons, former neighbors now in Dale City); Craig and Nick to Uncle Sammie’s and Aunt Emma’s farm; Opal took the baby to her home, her mother Stena was to help; Lucy Turner would come visit Gramma; Conclusion of Chapter: everyone talks about their vacations – Ed is involved the most in the end discussion;
“Josephine Encounters a Siren”	First published in <i>American Magazine</i> , December 1922 Additional Insight: Sirens, found in Homer’s <i>Odyssey</i> , are “creatures disguised as beautiful women whose beautiful singing lures sailors to jump into the sea and drown” (quoted from LitCharts) Aldrich states that the “spell of the siren was upon her” (Josephine). Does the word work as well in describing a friendship or should it only pertain to dating relationships? Major characters: Josephine, her best friend, Effie Peterson, Madeline Vance Guest

	<p>characters: Cutters; Miss Goddard, Superintendent Mr. Baxter Summary: When Madeline arrives to town, Josephine is fascinated by her. She puts aside her friendship with Effie. At the school program, Madeline reads Josephine’s story as if it were her own. Effie, her true friend, rescues her with a copy of another story Josephine had written.</p>
“The Nicest House in Town”	<p>First published in <i>American Magazine</i>, February 1923 Major characters: Nell, Ed, Brisbanes Guest characters: Cutters Summary: Nell Cutter had longed for a new house. Due to a friend defaulting on a loan they gave, they had been stuck at one address. Finally her house dreams are about to come true. She discovers her family does not want to move. Then she finds out that the seller is miserable due to money problems and stress. She decides to stay put. Potential question: Thanks to credit cards, the problem of overspending has magnified. Are there any easy solutions? We also live in a Pinterest perfect world. Is comparison a new problem? How can we be content?</p>
“The Homecoming”	<p>First published in <i>American Magazine</i>, July 1923; Summary: While Gramma enjoys the visit of her five other sons, she struggles with who they are compared to who they were. By the end of their time together, realizations have been made and joy is to be found. Major characters: Gramma, Ed, Nell, Sam, his wife, Ed, Rob, John, Joe, Davy. Additional question: Do you think the achievements of Gramma’s sons hurt or helped their perspective on reality. If time, discuss the quote found at the end of the chapter.</p>
“Meadows Entertains a Celebrity”	<p>First published in <i>American Magazine</i>, August 1923. Summary: World renowned author Alice Duffield was returning for a visit to her childhood home. Nell organized a fancy gathering in her honor. In the end, nothing went as planned. Soon the town realizes that the simple joys are best. Major characters: Alice Duffield Nell; Mrs. Ramsey, Lizzie Additional questions: Do you think most celebrities are as humble as Alice was?</p>
“Easy Money”	<p>First published in <i>McCall’s</i> September 1925; This story was about the Newsomes. Mrs. Aldrich decided to change it to the Cutters and include it in the book. This is the only chapter not originally printed in the <i>American Magazine</i>. Main characters: Nell, Ed, townspeople Summary: After trying unsuccessfully to make money, Nell decides to enter a contest to win money. Turns out, many others also tried. The result: lots of furniture polish. Additional Questions: Does this chapter fit in with <i>The Cutters</i>? These questions are only for groups that know each other well. 1) Why are “get rich” schemes appealing? 2) Have you ever been a part of what might be considered a pyramid scheme?</p>
“The Present Generation”	<p>First published in <i>American Magazine</i>, May 1922 Major Characters: Cousin Barbara Cutter & Doctor Rhodes; Summary: when Barbara visits her aunt and uncle for the summer, she has lots of strong opinions. She also helps a young dentist set up his house for his distant love; it turns out to be her. Additional Question: Do you think the quote, “the more things change, the more things stay the same” applies to this chapter?</p>
“The Children Grow Up”	<p>First published as “When the Children Grew Up” in <i>American Magazine</i>, December 1923 Major characters: all of the Cutters Summary: In the midst of the busyness of raising children, Nell is overwhelmed. By the end of the chapter, the older kids have grown. Only Leonard lives at home. She realizes she is grateful to still be in the midst of parenting. Additional question: Have you ever said (or had it said to you), “They grow up so quickly. Enjoy them while they are young.” This statement is true but also carries an undertone of guilt. Should parents (especially moms) enjoy every moment with their kids? How can they be present yet not put their lives completely on hold? Finish final book summaries.</p>